



ICOM Australia International Museum Day 2018 Winner student essay competition¹

Hyperconnected museums: new approaches, new publics

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Introduction

This essay examines the concept of 'hyperconnected museums' from the perspective of cultural materials conservation. It argues that although the value and benefit of hyperconnected museums lies in the many connections they make with communities, they are also faced with issues concerning the origin and meaning of cultural materials when mounting exhibitions and attempting to engage new publics. On this basis, the essay further argues that cultural materials conservation, with its concern for the material legacies of artefacts and the communities which make them, is invaluable to hyperconnected museums today. The essay begins with the definition and critique of the concept 'hyperconnected museum', before considering a case study of an exhibition presented in this environment: New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art's (The Met) 2013 exhibition *Making the invisible visible: conservation and Islamic art*. The essay discusses this exhibition's potential to engage new audiences, showing how it utilized a number of strategies to connect with a broad spectrum of public and professional communities, and increase awareness of Muslim populations' rich artistic and cultural heritage. The essay closes with a broader assessment of hyperconnected museums' potential to engage new publics. It concludes that hyperconnected museums should acknowledge the perspectives of cultural materials conservation to maintain their relevance in society.

¹ The views expressed in the essay are those of the author. Publication of the essay does not indicate an endorsement of those views by ICOM Australia.

The hyperconnected museum

The term 'hyperconnected' (from the Greek *hyper* 'over, beyond' and Latin *con-* 'together' and *nectere* 'bind') is commonly understood to describe 'the varied means of physical and technological communication and interaction available in the modern world, as well as the impact this technology has upon all aspects of 21st century life' (Cheek 2016, p. 5). While this term and its cognate, 'hyperconnectivity', have been preponderant since the early 2000s (see Shiota, Koeda & Takeshita 2000 and Quan-Haese & Wellman 2005), the idea was first associated with museums in a 2007 article by the renowned exhibition designer Tom Hennes.² Titled 'Hyperconnection: Natural History Museums, Knowledge, and the Evolving Ecology of Community', the article provides a useful theoretical framework to define the concept of a 'hyperconnected museum'.

In broad outline, Hennes' article argues that successful natural history museums in the 21st century function as 'hyperconnected hubs' (Hennes 2007, p. 87). By this, Hennes means collaborative environments with multiple ties to community where 'knowledge is exchanged and action initiated' (Hennes 2007, p. 87). As an example of this kind of museum, Hennes considers America's National Museum of Natural History (the Smithsonian). He refers to this museum as a 'hyperconnected hub' for many reasons including its sheer physical scale, its funding structure which supports free admission, its large annual visitor base of over six million people, and its links to government and the larger network of other Smithsonian museums (Hennes 2007, p. 103). The significant role of technology in enabling this museum to reach beyond its core audience and involve local communities through digitisation initiatives and other online projects is highlighted, as is the importance of its conservation department, whose pragmatic objectives go beyond peer research 'to build multidisciplinary partnerships among institutions, governments, communities and other parties' (Hennes 2007, p. 96).

Before critiquing this concept, it is interesting to note that Hennes contrasts this 21st century model of museums as 'hyperconnected hubs' with the 19th century model of museums as 'repositories of knowledge and objects' (Hennes 2007, p. 106). He suggests the development in museums' identity resulted from significant social and cultural changes in the world in the last 150 years, in view of which 'the argument for funding and maintaining' museums is no longer based on the 'intrinsic value' of their collections (Hennes 2007, p. 106). Rather, to have continued relevance in society, museums must demonstrate 'the importance of their collaborations, programs, community ties and role in a changing world' (Hennes 2007, p. 106).

While this focus on collaboration and community may appear self-evidently valuable, leading conservation scholar Robyn Sloggett convincingly articulates an avenue for their critique in a 2009 article. Titled 'Expanding the conservation canon: assessing cross-cultural and interdisciplinary collaborations in conservation', the article 'explores some of the dilemmas that relate to the existence of collections of cultural materials and efforts to preserve them' (Sloggett 2009, p. 170). Sloggett foregrounds the problems major institutions encounter when presenting international exhibitions without adequate consultation with, or representation of, the communities who produce artefacts and imbue them with meaning. As an example, she considers the

debate surrounding the Musée du Quai Branly when it opened in Paris in 2006, in which many descriptions of displayed items ‘did not include the title, artist, or community from which they were sourced’ and instead focussed on collectors (Sloggett 2009, p. 176). For conservators, whose codes of ethics and professional definitions foreground the importance of documenting and communicating objects’ significance, this decontextualisation raises a deeper issue (see ICOM-CC 1984 & AICCM 2018): namely, the diminution in meaning of artefacts, which compromises the public’s ability to understand the communities who made them.

In order to explore this issue further, the essay will now consider the exhibition case study *Making the invisible visible*, exhibited at The Met Fifth Avenue New York from April 2nd to August 4th, 2013. This case study was selected not only because it represents a landmark conservation exhibition in a major institution, but also because, in many respects, The Met exemplifies the model of a hyperconnected museum defined above. It is the second-largest museum in the world today after the Musée du Louvre in Paris, occupying four city blocks in New York with twenty connected buildings (Simmons 2016, p. 194). It also draws over seven million visitors per year and was the second-most visited art museum in the world, and the fifth-most visited museum of any kind in the world in 2016 (Hunter 2017). Further, in recent years The Met has made impressive use of technology to make over 375,000 images of artworks from its collections available for free public use and access (Tallon 2017). These factors strongly suggest that *Making the invisible visible* is a representative case study to understand the potential of hyperconnected museums.

Exhibition case study: making the invisible visible

Making the invisible visible aimed to present the ‘many exciting and interesting discoveries’ made by conservators and conservation scientists as they re-examined The Met’s collection of Islamic art in the early 2000s (The Met 2013a). This was completed prior to the opening of the *New galleries for the art of the Arab lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and later South Asia* (hereafter referred to as the *New Galleries*) at The Met in November 2011, after an eight-year renovation project. The exhibition theme of ‘making the invisible visible’ sought to acknowledge that much of conservators’ work concerns the ‘invisible’ material legacies of cultural materials, that is, their hidden preparatory designs, internal damages and later restorations (The Met 2013a). Although these aspects are ordinarily undetectable to the human eye (and thus museum visitors), the exhibition presented them to The Met’s visitors for the first time.

The portion of this exhibition that is documented on The Met’s website presents sixteen case studies of objects from around the Islamic world which had undergone recent conservation treatment at The Met (The Met 2013a). These included The Met’s early 18th century Damascene reception room, ceramics from Mina’i and Nishapur, a 14th century Moroccan wood panel, a 13th century Iranian ewer, a 16th century Spanish ceiling, and five textiles from the 13th to 20th centuries. Each object was accompanied by an explanation of the conservation treatment undertaken which included numerous high-resolution images illustrating areas of loss and repairs, as

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well as resources for further reading including links to websites with conservation articles and poster publications. The exhibition further generated a number of research outcomes which were shared at international conferences (see Baumeister, Edelstein & Rizzo, 2010, and Schultz, Arslanoglu & Petersen 2010), and developed videos on artefacts and their treatments which were made available through the popular video-sharing platform YouTube (The Met 2011).

Before evaluating this exhibition's potential to engage new publics it is important to note the context within which it was presented. The exhibition opened in April 2013, almost ten years after The Met closed its Islamic Art galleries, amongst the largest in the world at the time, for renovations in June 2003. Yet, as critic Holland Cotter has observed, the timing was unfortunate as the galleries 'went dark at a politically loaded moment' (Cotter 2003). The War in Iraq had begun in March 2003 and the destruction of the World Trade Centre by al-Qaeda less than two years earlier in September 2001 remained a landmark event in contemporary relations between Islam and the West. Accordingly, 'just when we needed to learn everything we could about Islamic culture', Cotter notes, 'a crucial teaching tool disappeared' (Cotter 2011). The *New Galleries* reopened in November 2011 to receive staggering visitor numbers: one million people in their first fourteen months, meaning 2550 people per day or fourteen percent of the total visitor attendance at The Met's main buildings during that period (The Met 2013b).

Discussion: engaging new publics

The public's heightened interest in Islamic culture at this time suggests that it was incumbent upon *Making the invisible visible* to utilise a number of new approaches to engage audiences and increase positive understanding of Muslim communities. The exhibition utilised a number of strategies characteristic of hyperconnected museums to achieve this. Firstly, *Making the invisible visible* took a novel approach to an 'established museum strategy', that of an exhibition, by presenting conservation practices which are ordinarily hidden from The Met's significant viewing public (Brooks 2013, p. 5). Further, the exhibition supported a number of original research outcomes including publications and conference presentations which connected with international professional communities of specialists in conservation, museum studies, and Islamic art history and culture. Finally, the exhibition utilised a number of technology-based strategies characteristic of hyperconnected museums including online videos, images and websites to connect with a broad range of local and international audiences unable to visit the exhibition or access the museum. Each of these strategies possess demonstrated potential to reach a diverse spectrum of general and specialist audiences including local visitors and communities, researchers and museum professionals, and vast audiences online.

More importantly though, the exhibition was able to educate its varied audiences about Islamic cultural heritage during a time of significant political upheaval in the region (Ekhtiar 2018). The presentation of conservation treatment undertaken on The Met's aforementioned 18th century 'Damascus Room' provides a key example of this. Amongst other things, it showed the multiple foreign and traditional cultural influences on the room's decorative program and composition; the high social status

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of the room's original owner in Damascus and his affiliation with the Islamic faith; and the origins of the room's previous display title at The Met, *Nur al-Din* (literally 'light of the faith'), as possibly referring to the famous 12th century Turkish-Muslim ruler Nur al-Din Zengi (d. 1174) (Kenney 2011). On the model of hyperconnected museums critiqued by this essay, these contributions 'along the broader axis of social and humanitarian concerns' define the very meaning of public engagement (Sloggett 2009, p. 170).

Conclusion

This essay began by defining and critiquing the concept of a hyperconnected museum. It has shown that conservation, with its concern for the 'invisible' legacies of cultural materials and the communities who produce them, provides a valuable perspective to understand museums' potential to engage new audiences in the 21st century. As the International Council of Museums (ICOM) rightly claims, museums are 'important means of cultural exchange, enrichment of cultures and development of mutual understanding, cooperation and peace among peoples' (ICOM 2018). In supporting the roles and perspectives of the conservation profession, ICOM helps museums to maintain this status in society. ICOM's Committee for Conservation is today the largest of ICOM's thirty International Committees 'with over 2600 members worldwide from every branch of the museum and heritage profession' (ICOM-CC 2018). On this view, conservation is set to be a key player in hyperconnected museums.



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